

Fathers and the stigma of work flexibility

When it comes to using work flexibility benefits for family reasons, men continue to face challenges because child care, fairly or unfairly, is still regarded as a feminine role

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by Lim Su Lin

Above left: For some fathers, the struggle to adopt flexible work policies has to do with balancing the desire to be with their families and competing work commitments

Above right: Nowadays, more and more working fathers from the Gen X and Gen Y are starting to be more family-centred. Companies that provide adequate flexible working policies would help them be more involved in the upbringing of their children

ONCE upon a time, in traditional Asian culture, couples had very distinct responsibilities within the family unit. While men were the breadwinners, responsible for working and earning enough to support the family, women played more of a nurturing role. Their main tasks were to run the household affairs and care for the children.

Today, the world has changed. Though women may still have traditional obligations to fulfil, more and more are balancing this with a career. Some may even choose to resume working after having their first child.

In Malaysia, flexible working arrangements have taken off in a number of professional firms and multinational companies. Many now offer options to employees, through formal programmes such as flexitime, reduced/part-time work, telecommuting as well as compressed work week and staggered working hours.

So, too, many non-profit organisations and smaller SMEs have started to allow employees to informally request flexibility to manage their work and family life.

Less take-up among men

Flexible work options allow working parents, both fathers and mothers, to juggle the roles of caring for their child and household responsibilities with work.

But though most companies offer flexible work arrangements to all employees regardless of gender, in most cases, the take-up is significantly less among male staff members.

One case in point is PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) Malaysia, one of the forerunners among Malaysian companies offering flexible working arrangements.

According to Florence Tan, PwC's corporate responsibility manager, the firm first considered implementing flexible work arrangements in early 2000, when a designer in its Business Development Centre announced her decision to leave due to family commitments.

Her director offered her what was then a novel option of working several days instead of a standard work week, in an attempt to persuade her not to leave. The designer agreed and ended up staying on for another seven years.

This set the ball rolling on flexibility at work. In 2009, the firm launched its Work Life Plus Programme which offered flexible programmes to all staff, regardless of gender.

Options included working a reduced work week at prorated salary, a 'Time Out' programme where employees could plan in advance for up to a month of additional time off beyond annual leave entitlements, and even a 'Career Break' option, where employees could apply for up to three months of continuous leave in a year, provided they had valid reasons for doing so.

In 2012, the firm introduced FlexSpace, where those at managerial levels and upwards could choose where to work from, as and when the situation called for it.

Collectively, PwC's gender-neutral flexible work policies (FWAS, for short) have been running for almost five years. Yet, according to Tan, few men have come forward to request for them.

"We have had very few men applying so far," she says.

"One partner, Andrew Chan, took a year's sabbatical to care for his son, and a few other male colleagues have applied for extended time off to care for their new-borns, but by and large, the majority of workers currently taking up these policies are mothers with young children."

Battling cultural stigma

Why is it that so few men are asking for work flexibility to care for their families, even though they are technically just as eligible for it as their women counterparts?

Of all reasons, underappreciation is one to rule out. When approached by *FocusM*, most fathers admitted that they value the option of taking time off to care for their families.

"I would prefer flexible working hours. Although my wife is not working, there could be times when she is not free or sick and unable to take care of the kids, like picking them up from school or bringing them for extra-curricular activities," says one father, who works as a financial analyst

and has two young children.

He is thankful that his job as an investment analyst affords him some flexibility to help out with parenting duties.

"As long as I make it for the 8am meeting, I am allowed to take some time off during office hours or an extended lunch time to run some errands," he says.

Lack of enthusiasm isn't the reason stopping working fathers from requesting flexible schedules. Rather, it is the subtle feeling that taking time off to attend to family matters is out of the norm.

"Generally, in Malaysia, the culture is still not so much attuned to men playing the role of caring for the family," says David Lee, who works for a non-profit organisation.

"There is still this mentality that we [men] should be grateful to be given the opportunity to work. We don't want to be seen as slacking, or giving an excuse that we want to take care of our families."

At Lee's current workplace, there is an informal approach to asking for flexible work arrangements.

"There is flexibility but it's not written. I just tell the boss that I'm coming in later," he says.

Lee occasionally uses this flexibility to help his wife with parenting duties, such as taking their son to and from day care.

However, he is careful not to request it too often, as he worries that it may lead to his colleagues and superiors forming negative impressions.

"I try not to make it so regular that it becomes an issue," he says.

"It would make people think, 'is there something wrong [within] your family that you would need to make certain arrangements to take time off every week?'"

Personal fears over job security

Lee's response reflect prevailing Asian perceptions surrounding men, work and time spent on family matters.

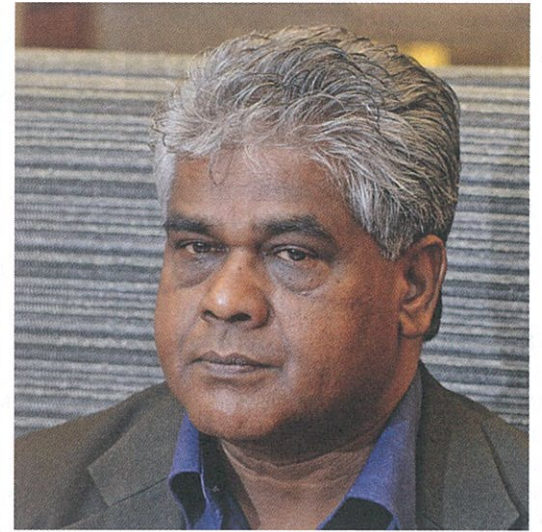
Though less stringent nowadays, they remain influential norms, causing many men to shy away from taking time off for family reasons.

"When it comes to diversity and inclusion, I know we talk about the female side of things a lot but I think from a flip side, there are also these cultural norms that make guys feel they shouldn't be taking time off just for family matters," says PwC Malaysia's Chan.

In Chan's case, balancing family commitments with work was another big challenge.

Chan was one of the firm's earliest male adopters of the flexible work arrangements. In 2012, he had applied for a year's sabbatical

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Right: Kishnam hopes to see more companies commit to work flexibility than just focusing on profit margins

Below: Chan, a partner in PwC Malaysia, who took a year's sabbatical to be with his family abroad. He is pictured here with his wife and two young sons

couples, especially those from the Gen X and Gen Y, are beginning to move towards playing complementary roles in family responsibilities.

Significantly, there are more working fathers like Lee and Chan, who want to focus more on their families and view their children as equal priorities to their jobs.

"When school reopens, just count the number of fathers there to help their children register. We can see that they are committed. Especially new fathers, they realise the need to spend time taking care of their children's welfare," says Malaysian Trade Union Congress secretary-general N Gopal Kishnam.

He believes that employers have a "moral obligation" to create an atmosphere of acceptance within the company.

"It is a moral obligation of employers to create this culture of encouraging fathers to take up flexible options, if they are committed to the importance of building strong families," he says.

"I hope to see more companies starting to show commitment to this, rather than just focusing on [their] profit margins.

More needs to be done

Creating policies is only half the battle won. Companies must work to eliminate the stigma often associated with requesting family leave or flexibility.

Most working fathers feel that communication is key to creating a shift in behaviour and encouraging acceptability throughout the company.

"Whether it's taken up or not is a different matter, but it's more of having that awareness that it is okay for men to take time off for personal family reasons ... that it's acceptable for men as well as women to place priority on personal family matters," says Chan.

"One way that companies can help create more acceptability might be to build more transparency about how flexibility will, or will not, affect promotions, wages and performance reviews. I personally think this should be built in [together with the flexible work policy]. It should not be a case of 'if I take more leave, my performance will take a hit,'" says Lee.

At the end of the day, while creating a culture of acceptance is still an ongoing process, it is very important that companies make flexible working options open to all employees.

There may still be some cultural taboos to face, but for some men, the reasons for wanting a flexible schedule are unmistakably clear.

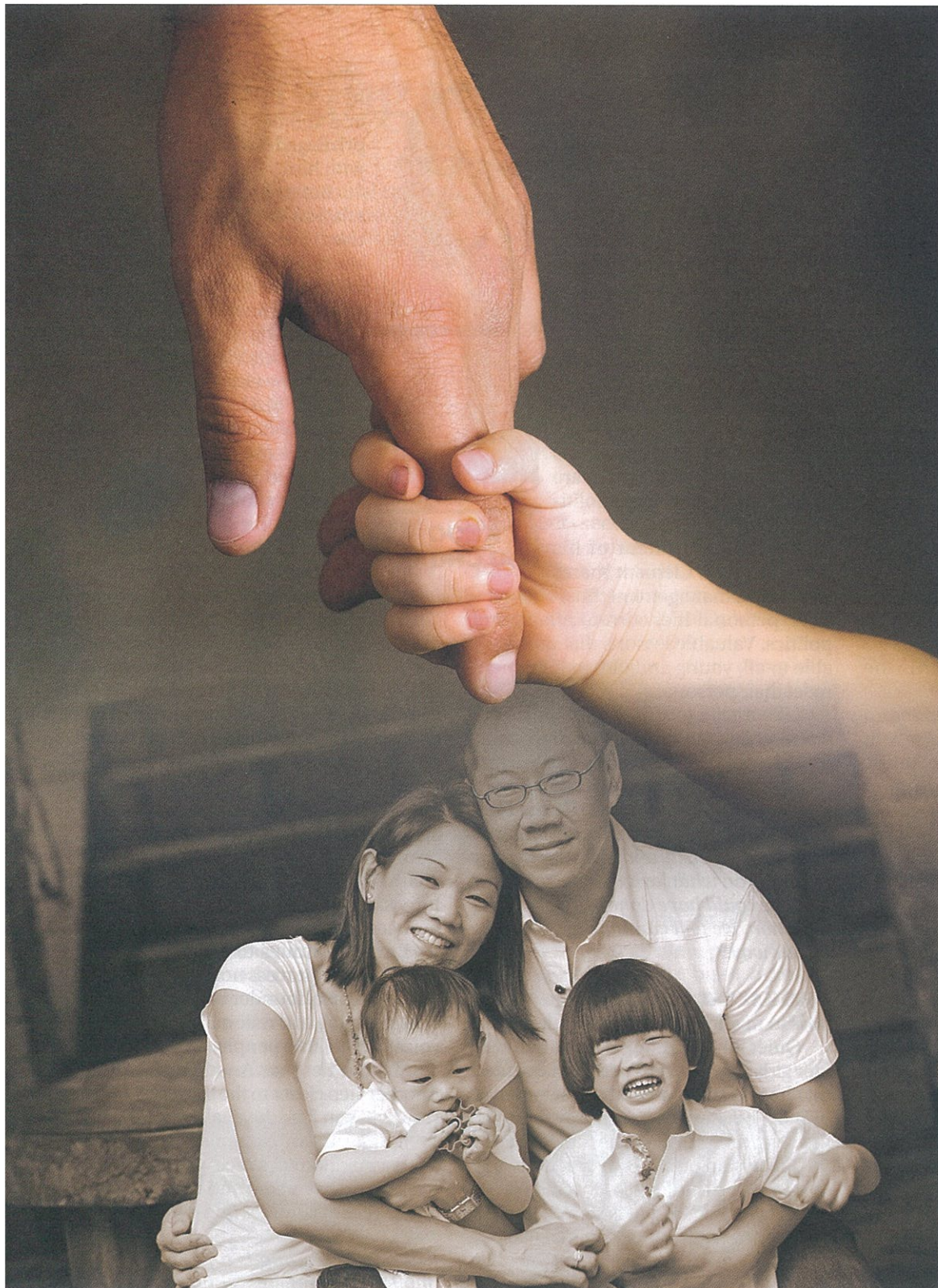
"It was a choice between a growing child versus a growing business. Both very young obviously... I picked the one that was more in need," says Chan.

In these situations, working fathers like Chan are more likely to want flexible options that allow them to balance work with caring for their families.

It is important that they be given the freedom to make that personal choice. **FocusM**

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— Kishnam



to follow his family abroad when his wife was accepted to do an MBA at the MIT Sloan School of Management.

"We had a young son, about one at the time, and she wanted to take him along," he recalls.

After discussing several options with the rest of the firm's partners, Chan chose the option of taking a full year out from the firm to be with his wife and young son.

It was not an easy decision to make. At the time, the firm did not have the mature flexible working arrangement programme in place that it does now. Especially for male partners, there was not much precedence in asking for time off.

Unfavourable perceptions aside, there was a bigger reason for worrying that his career might be jeopardised by taking time out.

Chan had joined the PwC Malaysia Consulting practice in 2003 and founded its Sustainability and Climate Change (S&CC) practice in 2008, at a time when the topic was still very young in Malaysia.

As he was about to apply for leave, interest in the sustainability agenda was picking up.

"From a business angle, it was a tough time to go. A lot of things were happening within the firm, in terms of client work, as well as with the market in general," he explains.

"Having grown the practice to a degree where [local] companies and the government were starting to get interested ... it was a tough decision. What will happen if I take a year off?"

In the end, Chan talked to the faculty at MIT Sloan and they were very interested in his practical experience in sustainability

and the perspectives in Southeast Asia. They offered him the position of a Visiting Scientist for a year, for him to share his insights on sustainability with both the faculty and students.

On both a personal and professional level, Chan says this helped him feel more reassured that the time spent away would be productive.

"As opposed to just taking a year out, which would have been good for the family, but then I would be leaving my team and business for a year. I thought about how to balance that by getting some business value while also putting my family's needs first," he explains.

A changing family landscape

The inertia from men when it comes to requesting for leave to be with their families seems to stem from two key reasons.

Firstly, there is an ingrained perception that only women are entitled to make requests for flexible schedules without facing repercussions at the workplace. Furthermore, with women enjoying a much longer period of maternity leave than men (two months versus two days) despite being in a male-dominated society, it is no wonder that men are hesitant to make such requests.

Secondly, there are also personal worries about job security, and the potential negative impact such moves might have on their career.

Like it or not, however, the reality is that traditional family dynamics are changing. Compared to a decade ago, more and more